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13 March 2015

Version of attached file:

Presentation

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Wells, V.K. and Taheri, B. and Gregory-Smith, D. and Manika, D. and McCowlen, C. (2014) 'Examining the role of employees and consumers in tourism environmental and sustainability CSR.', 22nd International Colloquium on Relationship Marketing – ICRM. Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK, 8-10 September 2014.

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***Extended Abstract: Examining the role of employees and consumers in tourism
environmental and sustainability CSR***

Victoria.K.Wells, Durham University Business School, Durham University*

Babak Taheri, Department of Business Management, Heriot-Watt University

Diana Gregory-Smith, Sheffield University Management School, University of Sheffield

Danae Manika, School of Business and Management, Queen Mary University of London

Clair McCowlen, Global Action Plan (GAP)

Keywords: Sustainability, Tourism, Employee, Consumers

* Contact details: Victoria.K.Wells, Senior Lecturer in Marketing, Durham Business School, Durham University, Queen's Campus, University Boulevard, Thornaby, Stockton on Tees, TS17 6BH t: +44 (0) 191 334 0472, f: +44 (0) 191 334 5201, e: v.k.wells@durham.ac.uk

Extended Abstract: Examining the role of employees and consumers in tourism environmental and sustainability CSR

Research on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and in particular the environmental sustainability element, has flourished in recent years with projects focusing on issues and consequences for the use of CSR. However it is clear, with regards CSR, 'one size does not fit all' and different organisations in different industries will be involved in CSR for differing reasons and with different barriers to implementation (Coles et al., 2013). In addition, within the tourism literature, it is generally considered that CSR research in tourism is at an early stage (Coles et al., 2013) with a fragmented body of knowledge, but it is acknowledged that CSR is an innovative way to create value for society and tourism organisations (Cooper et al., 2008) as well as building relationships with consumers and the community and creating competitive advantage (Kasim, 2006).

CSR research, both generally and in tourism, has ignored the individual or micro level, that is, the role of stakeholders such as employees and, to a certain extent, consumers (Beckmann, 2007; Chun et al., 2013). However, employees and consumers are an extremely important element of services industries such as tourism, due to the close proximity in which employees work and visitors consume.

The paper will present the results of a study testing an environmental social marketing intervention run by Global Action Plan (GAP), a leading UK environmental charity, among the employees of a large tourism organisation. The research had both qualitative and quantitative phases. This paper focuses on visitor elements in the results of the qualitative enquiry which included questioning 68 separate respondents, with interviews ranging from short intercept style interviews to longer depth interviews with both employees and visitors. The interviews were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim and the analysis was guided by

thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis process was fluid as the codes were modified as ideas developed and the results of the coding process along with sample coded interviews transcripts were shared between the researchers; enhancing the validity of our qualitative data (Jafari et al, 2013).

As in the employee environmental behaviour literature, issues such as self-efficacy, awareness/ knowledge, feedback, support, and infrastructure play a part in determining the level of involvement that the employees put into environmentally friendly behaviours. In addition, in line with the tourism CSR literature, employees report a range of drivers/facilitators (cost saving, health and safety, simplicity/ ease) and barriers (equipment efficiency, property type) to environmentally friendly behaviours, and highlight current and potential eco-initiatives, as well the importance of education and training.

For employees and consumers the visitor experience was highlighted on a number of occasions and appeared to be affected, in particular, by decisions made to improve the environmental sustainability of the organisation regarding lighting, heating, doors usage and the use/lack of bins. This means that on some occasions a decision had to be taken between the best option for sustainability and that for the visitor experience. Often the solution to this issue was found through making the most authentic choice for the building/property; for example, by choosing authentic light levels, allowing the use of sustainable lighting at a low energy consumption level, but perhaps not allowing the visitors to view the property and its features as best they could.

Communication of CSR and transparency is noted in the CSR literature (Bhattacharya and Sen 2010) and appeared to be important for visitors who felt that the organisation could publicise its green activities further which was also confirmed by some employees. It was generally felt by visitors that sustainability was part of what the organisation should be doing,

at least at the most basic level in terms of energy saving but overall a low level of awareness was seen confirming prior literature (Bhattacharya and Sen 2010). Therefore this also research responds to calls for research to explore awareness of CSR activities by consumers (Pomeroy & Dolnicar 2009).

When asked how consumers could be involved, both employees and consumers noted that they did not want excessive signage to highlight environmental issues and projects, and it was clear that visitors were at the property to “enjoy [themselves], we don’t want a lecture”. Thus there was a danger that the organisation would end up “speaking down” to the visitors. It appears therefore that any elements to market the sustainability of the organisations must not affect the visitor experience, but that for the organisation to meet its CSR sustainability objectives a balance might need to be struck between the two elements.

Overall, the potential for building customer relationships based on sustainability was largely ignored with sustainability being focused in house, which may be due to the breakdown in the link between sustainability and conservation, which some visitors and employees did not see. In addition, it was clear that the sites attracted many different types of consumers, some of whom may be less or more amenable to organisational sustainability aspects, with differing levels of knowledge/awareness regarding environmental issues. Hence, a relationship could be strengthened or built based on sustainability but with only some consumers. On the whole, however, it is clear that the employees do not see a role for consumers within sustainability and do not market sustainability to consumers directly, or use it to build relationships with consumers, at least in this tourism organisation. This supports prior research that companies communicating CSR is low (Pomeroy & Dolnicar 2009).

In support of qualitative academic research in the area (Beckmann, 2007) the results reveals disinterest and lack of knowledge in CSR related activities, although this appears to

be moderated by types of consumer, again supporting the academic literature (Vassilikopoulou, Siomkos, & Mylonakis 2005; Öberseder, Schlegelmilch, & Gruber, 2011). The research reinforces that the link between consumers and CSR activities is complex and intertwined, extending this research into tourism, and that the organisation has a lack of understanding of how CSR may affect consumers both positively and negatively and how it could be used a selling point or to help shape brand beliefs and differentiate the organisation (Pomeroy & Dolnicar 2009).

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